

CONFERENCE WRONG SIDE OUT.

THE minister had gone to New York to marry his sister, the lawyer was off on circuit, the deacon was laid up at home with a sprained ankle, and the Conference was coming. What should we do?

Do? Why, there was the church to be tidied up, the vestry to be cleaned, tables to be made and spread, crockeryware to be bought, begged, borrowed, and broken, food to be cooked by the cargo, and coffee and tea to be made by the barrel. I could not get an apple gathered or a log split for a fortnight, because "I've got to work up 't' the meetin'-house. You know Conference is comin'." Yes, all the autumn, Conference darkled vaguely in the horizon, and it was when October shimmered brown and gold and glorious, and Conference bore down upon us under full sail, near and inevitable, that the minister must needs go off a-marrying, the lawyer a-courting, and the deacon a-spraining his ankle. So we laity were left to prepare the way for a Conference which was used to good eating, and which we could not let starve on our hands without incurring perpetual disgrace. "Besides," said Conference-goers among our brethren and sisters, "we have been to Conference and got great dinners, and we will give them as good as they send."

It is a praiseworthy principle. Sealed be the lips that would gainsay it!

So, as foreordained from the pulpit, we gather to the preliminary meeting in the vestry, for we are advocates of law and order. We will have organization and a moderator. No mob-rule for us. In the vestry the women are merry and many; the men are two, and forlorn. The women hold seats on the right, as is their wont; they are fired with ambition, filled with plans and enthusiasm; they talk in loud whispers, confuse each other with cross remarks, and look daggers over at the two lonesome, unhappy men who flatter themselves they are talking together, but really, with hearts of lead, are only striving to pass away the time, and wishing that Blucher or night were come, and wondering what they shall do if neither Blucher nor night appears.

"Come now," says a woman energetically "go and shut those two men up in the small vestry and let us proceed to business."

For we are all woman's rights here, every mother's son of us, and knowing, dare maintain. That is, we take our rights without more ado. We have just voted that we will vote in church, and as for our husbands, we order them around well when we feel like it, and submit to nothing but fate. Still, we do our bullying by our own hearthstones, and sit in prayer-meeting as silent and meek as any subject race, to the annoyance of the free white males, who would like to have us take the burden off their shoulders by "offering a few remarks" at the Teachers' Meeting or the Sunday-school Concert. But we won't. We prefer to sit still, and criticise their remarks after we go home.

Finally, as the cows gradually get milked, and the horses shod, and the tale of human shoes made up, the men drop in one by one; somebody proposes a moderator, and we are fairly a-going. Now as we are all "woman's rights" this would seem to be the golden opportunity to put them in practice. The entertainment of the Conference is but an enlarged hospitality, and we women must engineer it through. Moreover, the Lord has taken away our three masters from our head to-day, and what doth hinder that we should not be our own masters and say what we want, and what we will have, and what we will do, without the intervention of the tyrant man?

Wherefore, the chairman being chosen, and the machinery ready to begin, we all sit with an expectant look in our eyes, and an embarrassed smile on our lips for two minutes. The men think they will give the women a chance, and keep still; and the women think they have got their chance, and it feels like a very large elephant on their hands. Presently we fall simultaneously to nudging each other to speak.

"We want a committee," whispers Mrs. A., from one end of the long settee, to Mrs. B. at the other.

"Then you get up and say so," says

Mrs. B. sententiously, which is not encouraging.

After much skirmish in whispers, one of the men rises and comes over to us. O wretched renegades that we are, disfranchised and degraded—the ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib. No sooner does this man take a seat on our settee than all the settees bow down and do obeisance as servilely as if they believed the head of the woman was the man. We pounce upon him, we twist ourselves around to face him, we shriek at him in horrid whispers, none of which can he distinguish, but he manages to strike a general average and rises to move that a committee be appointed. The motion is put and carried, and immediately a lively caucus ensues on the settees as to the appointees.

"Mrs. C.," says one.

"Yes, she is beautiful: you nominate her."

"No, you!" with expressive pantomimic gesture.

The little lady clears her throat, and tries to say in stentorian tones, "Mrs. C.;" but she miscalculates her force and there is a decided case of *vox faucibus hæsit*. Then we all giggle.

"Do somebody nominate her," says the biggest coward among us. "Can't you just say Mrs. J. C.?" As if it were as easy as breathing, she herself having nearly suffocated in the attempt, whereat half a dozen voices perpetrate another attack on the good name of Mrs. C. But as each voice is on a different key, and as they all begin with a wheeze and end with a whisper, and as we have squatted in the farthest back seats, while the chairman is at the other end under the pulpit, the nominations come to his ear only as a gentle inarticulate southing. Still he evidently thinks something is going on, and stares steadfastly and inquiringly into our corner, while we are smothering with laughter over our prowess. Presently one of us takes her life in her hands, and gathering up all her soul, hurls "Mrs. J—M—C—" at the moderator, in a voice ringing from desperation, twice as loud as there is any call for, and then looks back upon us with an air of triumph, evidently thinking she has made a speech, and that it is the speech of the evening. So we hitch

along, canvassing as we go, and announcing the result of each canvass in a confused and wabbling chorus of squeaky, husky voices, because nobody ventures to speak alone, and no two can agree to begin at the same instant, till the committee is chosen, and we rest on our arms and query what is to be done next.

We don't think of anything, but choose more Committee, when somebody brighter than the rest starts up the impertinent question, "What is this committee for that we have already chosen?"

"Why—everything," we say blankly, looking from one to another.

"To boss the job," says the carpenter, who has joined us, not professionally, however.

"To taste the things that are brought in, and see if they are good," says the chairman of the committee, his eyes dilate with foretaste of the feast.

Here it is suggested on the slowly darkening "men's side," that no one has kept a list of the names. The moderator proposes that a secretary be appointed. Our mouthpiece has—gallantly—no doubt the ladies will remember everything; still it may be advisable to have the list written, and he will act as secretary if any one will lend him a pencil. The moderator proffers a pencil, and Mouthpiece steals a march upon us by advancing to the front. Hereupon a muffled shriek of despair proceeds from the corner. "Oh! we have lost our man!" "Oh! now our man is gone, and we can't talk!" "Oh! make him come back again!" But he smiles and smiles from afar, and is villain enough to know when he is well off and stay there, and another king arises, seeing our bereaved condition, and deigns to come over and help us.

"We must have a committee to take care of the food," whispers Mrs. D.

"Yes," says Mrs. E., "if I send a pie, I want the Conference folks to have it. I don't want it eaten up by small boys!"

"And we ought to have a committee to take care of what is left, and set the table for supper."

"Why, we are not going to give them a supper."

"Yes, we are. There will be a good many who won't go till the last train, and will want a supper."

"You have too many on committee now," says King Stork; "you don't want any more."

"And who is going to do all the work?" we demand, turning upon him severely.

"Let this committee call in as much assistance as they want, but let them be responsible. If you have so many committees there is no head and no responsibility."

We gaze upon him with pity, remembering the long line of conferences and ordinations and tea-parties that have made our village history a trail of glory, and the innumerable committees under which our fields were won; but we remember also that he is but a late-comer, who, during those eventful days, was wandering in some outer darkness, and does not know that Britons never will be slaves; and though we are quite willing to work day and night, we will do it as committee and not as the menials and minions of a committee! Assistance indeed! Thus ever is the civic mind overridden by organization, and would sacrifice the noble pride of the rural districts to the same false god.

"We ought to have a committee on carriages," suggests one of the elect ladies.

"What do you want of carriages?" asks King Log.

"Why, to bring the people to and from the station."

"Nonsense. If they are well they can walk, and if they are sick they better stay at home."

"But the ministers, we mustn't make them walk." Forever to the female eye is your clergyman baked of purest porcelain; no common earthenware is he.

"Do 'em good," rejoins Earthenware brusquely; "they will enjoy it. When we had the ordination didn't Jeremy Taylor and Jonathan Edwards walk all the way and think it was fun?"

The elect lady is silenced, but not convinced. Meanwhile there has been a vote taken, and she holds up her hand. "What are you voting for? Take down your hand," cry the imperious whispers.

"I won't; I'm going to vote."

"But you are voting contrary-minded. We've all voted for Miss Mary B."

"I don't care. I'd rather be contrary-

minded than lose my vote." And men have the audacity to say that in the kingdom coming, of female suffrage, the best women will not vote!

"Take Mrs. X. Y. for the other one."

"What is that? Mrs. X. Y.? No, she is deaf, and she told me it was no use to put her on anything. Why don't you have Mrs. Q. P.?"

"Mrs. Q. P.! She can't come. You need not nominate her."

"Why can't she? She is a real good hand."

"But don't you know? She—why—she has a little baby."

"No, she hasn't. Her baby is two years old, and can stay with its grandmother."

"But she has another."

"I don't believe it!"

"It's true."

"How old is it, come?"

"Born in July."

"Well, that's news to me."

Everybody is taken aback, and the whole Conference comes to a dead halt over this problematical baby; but the definite date seems to silence doubts. If you can assert that a baby was born on a fixed day, it follows as the night that day that he was really born. So presently we return to business. Shall we have tea and coffee? No. 'Tea, but not coffee. Yes, tea and coffee. You can't make them both. Mrs. H. says you may have her cooking-stove. I will give the coffee rather than not have it. How much tea do we need? Oh! twenty or thirty pounds. Absurd! Six pounds is enough. Why, how many will be here? Thirty churches belong to the Conference. And they will all come. And most of 'em won't have any regular meals for two days beforehand, so as to get up an appetite. Oh! have we got a committee to go around and see what people will give? If we don't, they will all send in cake or pies and we shan't have any bread and meat. La! we haven't half committees enough. We ought to have sixteen more committees, two on each. Oh! see how Mrs. M. wants to be in office! She thinks if there are sixteen she will stand a chance. Why look. Mrs. N. and Mrs. O.

aren't on anything. They ought to be, they are so public-spirited. Well, make a committee and put them on. But we've got committees on everything you can think of. Make a general committee, then. But the first was a general committee. And this will be a general-in-chief. Make it quick. And the perplexed King Stork puts his private opinions in his pocket, and moves that Mr. N., Mr. O., Mr. P., and Mr. Q., be appointed a general committee.

"And their wives!" yell the settees in their enraged whispers.

"And their wives," echoes the mouthpiece, subdued beyond even the semblance of resistance.

And then, having formed committees enough to get ourselves all in honorable positions, we depart in peace; not fancying that we have made a brilliant stand for woman's rights, but firm in the faith that we shall come out strong on the Conference dinner. And if you win the battle, what matter whether you do it by Hardee's tactics or your own?

Conference Right Side Out is a very different and a very decorous thing. No committee, no squeaky voices, no seven women laying hold of one man, no croaking about cooking or pottering about pottery, but a dignified assembly of clergy and delegates met to report on the state and progress of their several Zions, to hear a memorial sermon, to take counsel with each other on the work of the Lord, and stir up their own pure minds by way of remembrance. Still, if you ask how the Conference was, ten to one the delighted villager will reply enthusiastically:

"Oh! everything went beautifully. There were two hundred and fifty people sat down to dinner, and enough for everybody, and plenty left. The baked beans and brown bread went like everything."

Angels and ministers of grace defend us! I wish to know if the churches are sound in the faith and alive in the spirit, and I am answered in baked beans! Yes, and I venture to say, if we could get at the core of things, good Christians as we all are, though we don't all know it, that not one of us who receive the Conference takes the least thought for the state of the churches. What we had at heart

was to furnish a good dinner for the clergy and the laity.

And how they did come! It rained almost incessantly, and we all know the frantic efforts of the ministers and the religious newspapers to make people disregard the weather on Sundays, and the blank array of empty pews with which people respond whenever there is a cloud in the sky no bigger than a man's hand. So we went to church bemoaning our loaded hampers, and resolving to stay and dine ourselves rather than our viands should be lost—especially as we had no dinner at home—and lo! a great multitude had gone up to the courts of the Lord, and our pews were full in spite of the rain, and those of us who came to eat remained to serve.

"What shall we do with our loaves and fishes?" communed the villagers on their way to the tabernacle.

"What shall we do with the people that have come to eat them?" they asked, in the consternation of hospitality, when the tabernacle door flew open to the throng that gathered there.

I must confess I attempted to stir up sedition, but met with inglorious failure. Seeing the chaos and care, the tables to be made, the settees to be turned and overturned, the order to be disordered, and the disorder to be reorganized into order, I said, "It is too much work. It is fatiguing to think of." And everybody cried with one voice, not a bit of it. Indeed they were as blithe as blackbirds, and as chattering. It was fun, and society, and good cheer. The more the merrier, both of hosts and guests; so then I turned right about face, determined to pick a quarrel with the existing order of things, somehow, and said: "This shows how much we need amusements. This Conference is a sort of ecclesiastical ball and supper. They are talking instead of dancing up in the ball-room, but they don't look much more solemn than the average American going through a cotillion, and I reckon the average cotillion American does not cheat in trade, does not snub his wife, does not lose his temper much oftener than the average church American. But we churchlings have so discountenanced amusements that we are infinitely amused by

so small a change in our daily life as doing by the dozen once in seven years what we do singly at home every day. The pleasure of getting out of the narrow routine of home, of getting together with our friends and neighbors, takes the wear and tear out of the work, and instead of wearying refreshes and heartens us. Why do we not then learn a lesson from this, and invent pleasant little assemblies for and of ourselves, with or without baked beans, where young and old can meet and chat and sing and play such games as do not go against the conscience of the brethren? Why not have, that is, a little neighborhood conference every month, or as often as shall seem agreeable, to which good manners shall be the only entrance fee, and where baked beans or roasted potatoes shall be the inexpensive but sufficient entertainment, though each may bring that which seems good in his own eyes?"

This would make the church the recognized social as well as religious centre, and might somehow equalize matters. For me, I am amazed at the goodness of the world, its forgiveness, and forbearance, and general virtuousness. Here we church-folk berate the "world's people" every Sunday about their trespasses and sins, and yet no sooner do we get up a Conference, which is exclusively a church matter, and has nothing to do with the world except to burnish up the weapons wherewith we mean to attack it, and immediately the kindly, hospitable, good-natured world forgets all the hard names we have been calling it; turns to with as hearty a will as if it were in good and regular standing; knocks up tables and chairs, provides horses and carriages, spreads thick slices of bread and butter, and thin slices of ham and tongue, all one as if we had not ruled it out of the King-

dom Come. And we gladly accept. We have no intention of associating with it in the next world, but we are very glad to avail ourselves of its services in this. We make a distinct mark on the sheep of our fold, and so class them off from the goats; but so far as natural history is concerned you never could tell them apart.

There is, I regret to be obliged to say, one drop of bitterness in our sweet draught. We did not have puddings. To be sure we did not need them. Need them! I should think! Why, when Mrs. Betty came in, erect and confident, with bag, pail, and pillow-case, and succinctly inquired, "Meat cut up yet? Want the scraps;" were we not so filled with faith in our resources that, though the meeting was barely begun in the church triumphant above, and the tables not spread in the church militant below, generous hands laid hold of joints, carved out bones, and cut off gristle, leaving large margins of meat, made odds and ends where none existed, and sent Mrs. Betty away rejoicing, to feed out of her pillow-case till Thanksgiving?

No, we did not need puddings, nor even miss them till the next day, when, as ill luck would have it, they got up an installation in the neighboring village, which we all attended, and the iron entered into our souls, for they installed with puddings! In every other respect we think we held our own; but those frosted, foamy puddings gave a whiteness and delicacy to the tables which ours lacked. We like our minister too well to hope for an installation of our own, and the Conference only comes round once in seven years; but I warrant you whoever lives to see that day will see something in the way of puddings that shall make all his previous experiences of frost and foam seem but an idle dream.
